

Former

A.E. Stueve

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A. E. Stueve's extraordinary new novel, *Former*, is set in a terrifyingly conceivable future, when the country has been ravaged by the Infection War. In unflinching detail, Stueve delineates a world in which the very definition of personhood has come into question. His work traces the paths of his characters in stark prose that heightens the perils and issues they struggle to overcome.

Survivors are divided into two groups: "formers"—those who were formerly infected but somehow survived and now live in camps controlled by Profine Pharmaceuticals—and those who were never infected but struggle to survive in a nearly postapocalyptic world.

As a "former," Billy struggles to make sense of his new normal. His wife died in the Infection and he is now protected but confined in the Profine camp. Most of those on the outside of the camps are ready to see the formers killed off, certain that they are at fault for the massive casualties brought on by the Infection. Many suspect there may be secret and sinister reasons that the pharmaceutical company is providing the formers with shelter, security, and treatment. Billy isn't even sure he wants to live anymore, and certainly not in a world that has become as cruel as this one.

Right from the beginning of *Former*, Stueve sets the scene of a dark, difficult, and uneasy normality, one in which all humans look at each other with suspicion, look for someone to blame, and look for a way out. It's easy to see why many characters are seeking a means of escape; the desperation of such a setting is overwhelming at times, and the author's pointed and spare style fits the scenes perfectly. The tightly written chapters are fast paced and full of intrigue, and each one adeptly moves the story forward. Stueve's abilities shine through in his bleak descriptions of life in such a world:

I can feel crusty boogers caked in the corners of my eyes. I'm still in the cell, lying on what feels like a cold concrete slab. There's a thin sheet draped over me. It smells like piss. I hope it isn't mine.

This work is haunting and eerie, and somehow, finally, filled with hope. *Former* is certainly an intriguing and engaging read. It would find an approving home with those who enjoy a creative, thrilling, and disturbing read—one that lingers long after they have turned the last page. Suffused with the dark melancholy of a dystopian future, yet bright with the promise of possibility, this novel affirms Stueve's position as an author to watch in this genre.

TRACY FISCHER (December 3, 2015)

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